USACHS

Writing Requirement

The Catholic Parish Council in a Military Parish

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Most of what appears in this paper is taken from personal experience. It is not meant to be a perfect and final guide. However, it is meant to be a vehicle by which you may gleam from our experience and from your own background to help you in any future efforts. I say "our experience", because it was truly an endeavor by all the priest and interested lay leaders at Fort Benning at the time. There are a few adjustments that each post may have to make. There are special emphasis that need be made in a military parish in contrast to a civilian parish. This experience and emphasis will be integrated through out this paper as we define a Parish Council, look at its basic concepts and structure and then finally consider the steps necessary for the establishment of the council.

A Parish Council - What? Why?

The need for a Parish Council is set forth in two documents of Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and Decree on Lay Apostolate. These documents show the parish as a Christian community, with the pastor, as the representative of bishops, presiding over the apostolic efforts in which all members of the parish participate.

Vatican II urges us to steer a middle course between two extremes: on the one hand, overemphasis of the hierarchical mission within the church which makes the layman's role to be purely passive; and on the other hand, over-insistence on the common priesthood of all Christians which would eliminate differences of kind and degree of mission and office within the church. The search for structures suitable for uniting hierarchy and laity led Vatican II to recommend explicitly the Parish Council. In doing so, what the council asks is not identification

of priest and people, but cooperation between them. I believe that in the military parish more than any other place this cooperation and and openness have to be manifested on the part of priest if there is to be a living parish.

The two decades of the 50's and 60's have witnessed many changes in all walks of life, spiritual as well as secular. One of the changes that is more noticeable has to do with authority. There seems to be a changing concept of authority. Some, apparently misinterpreting the historical movement, would rebel against and do away with authority. Others, while recognizing legitimate authority, believe that authority is to be exercised in collegial manner with the people of God. We see this in the Church universal with the bishops beginning to take more of a stand on matters pertaining to the church, though always with the thought that Peter alone was made head of the apostles. We see this in the parish with the cooperation of priest and people, but in final analysis the pastor is the representative of the Bishop and is responsible for the care of the souls entrusted to him.

Perhaps this trend toward decentralization or sharing of work and responsibility is the work of the Spirit within the Church, enabling the Church to adjust to the needs of the times. It is not always easy to discern where the Spirit breathes. There is always the danger that His Presence may not be felt. What is at stake is not simply the good of the present church or the existing parish structure. What is of concern is the future and the continued growth of the Body of Christ. It is really difficult to state how parish structure may change to meet present and future needs. A spirit of faith is needed, a trust in the presence of the Spirit. In the words of the Council:

"Because they are partners in the priestly, prophetic and regal role of Christ, lay people share actively in the life and action of His Church. Within the communities of the Church their cooperation is so much needed that without it the apostolate of the pastors would be largely ineffectual... lay people offering their competencies... lend efficacy to the care of souls and even to the management of Church properties."[1]

"An individual layman, by reason of the knowledge, competence, or outstanding ability which he may enjoy, is permitted and sometimes even obliged to express his opinion on things which concern the good of the Church. When occasions arise, let this be done through the agencies set up by the Church for this purpose. Let it always be done in truth, in courage, and in prudence, with reverence and charity toward those who by reason of their sacred office represent the person of Christ."[2]

"Wherever it is possible there should be diocesan councils which through the cooperation of clergy and religious with lay people, can assist the apostolic work of the Church both in evangelizing and sanctifying, and charitable, social and other endeavors. Such councils will be helpful to the mutual coordination of various lay enterprises and organizations without threatening the autonomy and special character of each group... Such councils should also be established as far as possible, in the parish, and on the inter-parish, interdiocesan, national and international levels."[3]

BASIC CONCEPTS AND STRUCTURE

Before proposing a set of goals, structures and functions for the Parish Council, the following conditions are assumed:

1. That the involvement of laymen in the parish must be more than advisory, that is, they must become involved in decision making, in the proposing and implementing of programs.

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1. Decree on Apostolate of Laity, ch III, par 10

2. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, ch IV, par 37

3. Decree on Apostolate of Laity, ch V, par 26

2. That lay involvement must extend beyond the "material sphere" and include spiritual, educational and social responsibility as well.

3. In view of the above some reorientation of the typical military parish is needed.

4. That there be a period of education on the thoughts of Vatican II and provision made to educate the clergy, and laity alike.

It may be helpful to point out common dangers involved in setting up Parish Councils:

1. The Parish Council is not to appear as a control mechanism by the senior priest on post, the pastor, the parishioners or any rank structure, but rather as a community of Christians cooperating together in the work of Christ.
2. The Parish Council should not be a perpetuation of parish organizations. Neither should it run roughshod over these voluntary groups which have "carried the ball" for so many years.
3. No matter how competent the Parish Council becomes the priest must still remain the central figure in the community-forming work of the parish.
4. No one can expect instant success.

GOALS OF THE PARISH COUNCIL

The following are suggested as minimum essential goals of a Parish Council, and ought substantially to be included in any statement of purpose for such a Council:

1. Determination of the real needs, spiritual and temporal, of the parish, military community and our military diocese.

2. The continuing apostolic formation of all parishioners.

3. Frequent dialogue among the People of God - priest and laity, in the rank structure and young and old.

4. Assignment of priorities and encouragement of action as to the needs of the Church and human society.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE PARISH COUNCIL

The method of organization appropriate for one post may be inappropriate for the next. Therefore, no single structure is recommended here. Instead, mention will be made of several approaches found helpful in different circumstances, thus affording "a plurality of forms" from which the parish can choose, while remaining within the common framework, these guidelines are intended to ensure.

What is desired is a "parish created" council, that is, one where priest and people cooperate in the selection of the representatives of the parish who will sit on the council, and thus make the Parish Council truly "the parish in miniature". Therefore members generally are not to be appointed, but should be elected.

Total membership of the Council should be no fewer than seven (7) and no more than thirty (30). While these numbers may seem to be arbitrary, they are the outside limits recommended by the literature on group dynamics.

All priest on post are to be ex officio members of the council with the right to vote. Generally, ex officio members should not hold any office on the Council.

Any Brothers and Sisters working on the Post in the Religious Education Program should be entitled to a place on the Council.

Sufficient lay persons shall be elected to complete the organization of the council.

COMMITTEES OF THE COUNCIL

Parish Councils should set up committees as their sub-units in charge of various groups of parish activities.

A committee is suggested for broad areas of insterest, according to the greatest needs for Christian witness and service. Different ones will be necessary for different post. It will be up to each Parish Council to determine for itself which committees will be needed. Care should be taken that the work of the various committees be integrated into a harmonious parish plan.

In each parish setting there should be at least the following four Committees which bring home the fundamental concept that the people of God share in the many roles of Christ spoken of in the Scriptures and reiterated by Vatican II: 1. Service Committee; 2. Worship Committee; 3. Formation Committee and 4. Administration Committee.

A. Service Committee

Purpose: to promote active involvement in social action and post services in the full range of community living.

Objectives:

1. to survey and make known to the parish social, civic and ecumenical needs at the local level.
2. to assist in programs designed to alleviate poverty and racial discrimination.
3. to promote community volunteer programs both on and off post; for example Red Cross, tutoring of the underprivileged, visiting the elderly and shut in.

4. to promote youth programs and help keep them operational.

5. to promote social functions for groups of the parish and at times the parish as a whole.

B. Worship (Liturgy)

Purpose: to foster and deepen a fruitful liturgical life for the parish and general community at all age levels.

Objectives:

1. to survey and make known liturgical needs of the parish.

2. to foster the implementation of all liturgical reform in community worship as approved by the Military Ordinariate and Vatican II.

3. to promote and plan family and neighborhood liturgies on post.

4. to establish and/or assist organized framework which aid in the liturgical services: e.g. lectors, commentators, ushers, music directors for choirs and folk groups.

C. Formation

Purpose: to foster the Christian formation of all parishioners interested others at all stages of development.

Objectives:

1. to promote and implement a total religious education program in the parish, involving all persons, from the cradle to the grave.

2. to be responsible for continual evaluation of all parish religious education programs.

3. to encourage and assist in obtaining teachers for the CCD program.

4. to concern itself with leadership training for all parish members in present leadership roles and future leaders, especially those involved in CCD, Pre-Cana, Marriage Encounter and Liturgical Reforms.

D. Administration

Purpose: Although not as imperative as in a civilian parish, to realize the need to provide for the administrative and financial needs of the parish.

Objectives:

1. to keep the Council informed as to the budget reported to the Fund Council and a updated account of how matters stand.
2. to outline programs for the coming year, gain parish approval for such plans. To support these plans by free will offerings. For example, charitable and missionary activities, and parish social functions.
3. to have one member of the Committee as a member of the post fund council where possible.

EXISTING ORGANIZATIONS

The mind of Vatican II is that the existing parish organizations should be safeguarded, as long as they perform a useful function. They should not be automatically abolished. Each post should take this opportunity to examine and evaluate the effectiveness of existing organizations and judge whether in some instances they can be integrated into the Parish Council. Most of these organizations should not feel threatened but coordinate where it seems possible, revitalizing some and assuring a total view to all programs.

CREATING THE COUNCIL

The creation of a Parish Council is not something that can be effected overnight. It takes time -- it takes time -- it needs time. It must truly be allowed to evolve according to the circumstances currently

existing on each post. What may apply to Fort Benning may not apply to Fort Knox. Whether there are trainees, post housing, the priest involved and the existing parish spirit all will play a part, to mention but a few. Involvement needs some help and these three steps are offered to assure a reasonable evolution within a reasonable time. These steps are common to all sources and suggestions. They are 1) Creation of a Steering Committee; 2) a Parish Education Program; 3) Election procedures.

Even prior to the first step there must be some educational or instructional effort.

If a Parish Council is to be formed it will be necessary to carefully plan and supervise the various steps leading to it. There should be one central steering Committee to organize the entire project. This committee should be representative of the life of the parish. It should have from seven to twelve members.

Parishioners must be given an understanding of what is happening and why: they must be informed. Few lay people are used to being offered the kind of participation which the Parish Council invites. The entire parish must be made aware of the goals of the Parish Council -- of the reason for its existence.

At a given time there will be an election. However, this is not to be rushed. It is a good plan to allow half the steering committee to continue on the Council with the other half elected. This would allow stability and make the term of office two years.

At this time it would be well to consider a constitution. You might gather and study existing constitutions from civilian parishes and other

military posts. You should consider what would best apply to your situation. It might be well to use your choice as a guideline for the first year. After a year's use and practical experience, then it would probably be feasible to consider your own constitution for your particular setting.

In conclusion there are some important reminders, two that should never be forgotten. The first is be patient and travel slowly. The second is very much akin to this; keep the people informed, especially of each step along the way and allow time for it to be planted, and take root before you move to the next step.

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